

The Natural Approach

Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell developed the Natural Approach in the early eighties (Krashen and Terrell, 1983), based on Krashen's theories about second language acquisition. The approach shared a lot in common with Asher's Total Physical Response method in terms of advocating the need for a silent phase, waiting for spoken production to "emerge" of its own accord, and emphasizing the need to make learners as relaxed as possible during the learning process. Some important underlying principles are that there should be a lot of language "acquisition" as opposed to language "processing", and there needs to be a considerable amount of *comprehensible input* from the teacher. Meaning is considered as the essence of language and vocabulary (not grammar) is the heart of language.

As part of the Natural Approach, students listen to the teacher using the target language communicatively from the very beginning. It has certain similarities with the much earlier Direct Method, with the important exception that students are allowed to use their native language alongside the target language as part of the language learning process. In early stages, students are not corrected during oral production, as the teacher is focusing on meaning rather than form (unless the error is so drastic that it actually hinders meaning).

Communicative activities prevail throughout a language course employing the Natural Approach, focusing on a wide range of activities including games, roleplays, dialogs, group work and discussions. There are three generic stages identified in the approach: (1) Preproduction - developing listening skills; (2) Early Production - students struggle with the language and make many errors which are corrected based on content and not structure; (3) Extending Production - promoting fluency through a variety of more challenging activities.

Krashen's theories and the Natural approach have received plenty of criticism, particularly orientated around the recommendation of a silent period that is terminated when students feel ready to emerge into oral production, and the idea of comprehensible input. Critics point out that students will "emerge" at different times (or perhaps not at all!) and it is hard to determine which forms of language input will be "comprehensible" to the students. These factors can create a classroom that is essentially very difficult to manage unless the teacher is highly skilled. Still, this was the first attempt at creating an expansive and overall "approach" rather than a specific "method", and the Natural Approach led naturally into the generally accepted norm for effective language teaching: **Communicative Language Teaching**.